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ABSTRACT

To explain some of the problems and questions concerning the study of communicative competence, this paper discusses observations that motivate activity in the area and several issues generated by the observations, and suggests implications of the issues raised. The observations discussed first are that humans manage to get things done communicatively in ways that differ from those of other animals, and that some people are consistently effective communicatively, while others are consistently ineffective. The issues discussed are the difficulties in defining effective and ineffective communications and communicators, the role of intentionality, general and specific models, knowledge versus performance, and how to locate communicative competence. Several of the implications mentioned in the paper are the difficulties in measuring communicative competence in normal situations, the problems in making judgments regarding exactly what competent communication is, and the need to trace and devote time to questions of developmental communications. (CRH)

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SOME ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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SOME ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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An important question for our purposes is: What sorts of problems, mysteries, anomalies, or more neutrally, questions have motivated theorizing about communicative competence? What is the "it" that has to be explained? There are two rather distinct answers to this question which point to a number of assumptive disparities undergirding the study of competence. Let us call these disparities "issues" although it should be noted that the disparities frequently do not represent clashes or points of conflict. We will first briefly discuss the problematic observations which have motivated activity in this area; we will then discuss several issues generated by these observations, suggesting implications of each competing (or dissimilar) position; and finally we will discuss general implications of the issues raised.

Objects of Explanation

We believe that sane persons do not theorize without reason; theories are not generated randomly about anything whatsoever. Rather, theories are attempts to explain or account for striking, surprising, or important facts (Reynolds, 1971). What facts have motivated theorizing about communicative competence? A cynic might say that much of the current activity has been stimulated

by one indisputable fact: Noam Chomsky's (1957, 1965) postulation of linguistic competence was remarkably effective in solving certain residual problems of language study. (So, the mystery is: Why are linguists making progress while we are not? And the answer is: They have "competence.") But we are not cynics and will accordingly suggest two real-world facts (sets of facts, actually) which have motivated thought in this area, at least implicitly:

1. Humans manage to get things done communicatively in ways which differ from those of other animals. Humans understand other humans (at some level, in some sense) but do not understand, say, dolphins. Persons interested in these general facts could give as an instance the recent episode where the United States representative displayed a transcript of Soviet ground-to-air communications to the General Assembly of the United Nations following destruction of a Korean commercial airliner. Presumably the transcript made clear to all parties what was transpiring communicatively between pilot and ground in spite of the vast cultural and experiential differences operating in the viewing/listening situation. A dolphin would not have understood (lucky dolphin).

2. Some people are consistently effective communicatively, while others are consistently ineffective. And some people are inconsistent in their degree of effectiveness from situation to situation. A person embracing this fact could point to: Ronald Reagan, the "great communicator," who is "great" in delivering canned speeches but terrible in responding extemporaneously at press conferences; Demosthenes; James Watt, who all despised;

Henry James, who was a stutterer; the individuals we all know who always seem to get their way; and those who never do.

Researchers and theorists interested in the first set of facts have generated certain hypotheses which differ from those generated by persons interested in the second set. This is perfectly reasonable, since both groups are attempting to explain different communicative phenomena. One group is concerned primarily with variation across species, while the other is concerned with variation within species. To an extent the groups represent schools which define their universes dissimilarly (Kuhn, 1962). Some of these dissimilarities are indicated next.

Issues

Effectiveness and Effectiveness

In a sense both the Competence[1] and the Competence[2] schools are concerned with communicative effectiveness. Communication is assumed to have consequences which are important. This assumption is basic to the theorizing of both entities. However, the groups conceptualize effectiveness differently. The Competence[1] theorists note that communicators are usually successful in making their intentions understood, in seeming coherent, in seeming communicatively usual, in eliciting communicatively relevant responses from others, in distinguishing random movement from purposeful action, etc. Ineffective communicators are comparatively rare, abnormal, pathological. Ineffectiveness occurs when the various structures which make communication possible (Sanders & Martin, 1975) are damaged. Ineffective communications, i.e., messages, are relatively rare, although less rare than ineffective communicators, and when

produced by effective communicators are easily repaired because these effective persons have the competence to make repairs.

On the other hand, those in the Competence[2] School observe that persons vary considerably in obtaining attitude change, creating impressions of intelligence and sociability, achieving and producing interpersonal satisfaction, contributing to relational harmony, etc. Ineffectiveness is a normal attribute, as is effectiveness. Ineffective communicators have learning problems which can be overcome. Effective communicators have learned well.

Bateson's "badness-madness" distinction is useful in thinking about the meanings of effectiveness (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967). For Competence[1] theorist, communicators are normal or they are mad (insane, brain-damaged, or defective); normal persons can do things with words (Austin, 1962). For Competence[2] theorists, communicators are good or they are bad or, more likely, they are average. Good communicators are liked, frequently get what they want, often create harmony, etc.

Competence[1] theorists invoke a dichotomous statistical model which is strongly skewed toward effectiveness (see Figure 1). Competence[2] theorists invoke a normal curve.

Effectiveness for Whom?

For those in the Competence[1] School, the assessment or determination of effectiveness is not especially problematic, although the causes of effectiveness or, more accurately, the structures which make effectiveness possible are. Instances of effective communication are all around us, occurring constantly. Instances of ineffective ("mad") communication stand out and are

easily noticed by all parties, except by ineffective communicators--those who are "mad."

On the other hand, for Competence[2] theorists the assessment of effectiveness is fraught with intriguing problems, the most central of which is: Under what circumstances should the labels "effective" and "ineffective" be applied? These labels (which represent judgments) may be applied by the communicator him/herself, by message recipients or other persons involved in the transaction, or by third parties constituting external observers. The labels may be applied after a single session, in which case they represent short-term "diagnoses" of the sort made by public speaking teachers, or they may be applied after multiple sessions, in which case they represent cumulative judgments of communicator style. They may reflect technical knowledge, e.g., empirically tested theories of communication effectiveness, or naive knowledge, e.g., implicit or tacit communication theories (Berger & Bradac, 1982).

A difficulty arises when effectiveness judgments differ according to standpoint, e.g., where self judges a communicative effort to have been effective according to naive criteria, whereas others judge the effort to have been ineffective according to technical criteria. What is needed is a theory explaining such disagreements, which would be analogous to attribution theoretical attempts to account for differences between actors' and observers' assignments of responsibility for action (Jones & Nisbett, 1971).

The Role of Intentionality

Apart from the issues surrounding effectiveness, although having implications for them, questions can be raised about the connection between intentionality and communicative competence. Competence[1] theorists invoke "intention" as a crucial entity which distinguishes human communicative possibilities from those of other animals (Scott, 1977). Intentions are conceptualized as constructs comprising beliefs and desires, and non-human organisms do not have (cannot have) beliefs (at least) because apparently they do not have access to propositional systems such as language. Humans, on the other hand, formulate communication strategies which reflect intentions routinely. The acquisition of a strategic repertoire and the ability to perform speech acts are an essential part of competence. Intentions are a part of the structure which makes human communication possible. Competence[1] theorists typically take "intention" as a primitive (unanalyzed) term.

For Competence[2] theorists, intentions have a less central role, for they do not help to explain why some persons succeed while others fail, nor do they assist in accounting for one person's variable performance across occasions. Other "internal," "mediating," or "hypothetical" entities are more important for the Competence[2] theorist, most notably, attitudes and various other psychological traits, e.g. motivation (White, 1955), or states, e.g., empathy (Wiemann, 1977) and involvement (Cegala, 1981).

Regardless of which internal variable is deemed more or less explanatorily important by competence theorists, a common

research problem exists, namely, the problem of measurement: How is degree of involvement most usefully assessed? How intention? Communicator self-report is the most commonly used device, but this has familiar problems: persons lie; they have limited access to cognitive processes (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977); and they have a limited vocabulary with which to express such processes (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Yet, individuals also have the most intimate knowledge of themselves and, even when it is faulty, this knowledge is important for social scientists (Harre & Secord, 1973).

General Versus Specific Models

Competence[1] theorists are predisposed by their central problem to focus rather narrowly upon those and only those structures essential to human communication (or the communication of non-humans): Which structures make communication possible? One such model looks like the one in Figure 2 (Berger & Bradac, 1982).

On the other hand, Competence[2] theorists are more likely to invoke more general explanatory models, models which might be characterized as broadly social psychological. This is the case because many general social and psychological variables, e.g., arousal or activation, may help to account for within-person and between-person variability in communication. A general model of this sort is shown in Figure 3.

This suggests questions without a clear answer: Would Competence[2] theorists profit from a narrower focus, perhaps for the moment ignoring variables which are not essentially communicative? Would Competence[1] theorists profit from a

broader focus? It does seem to us that the attention paid to some non-communicative variables, e.g., general motivation, has been unproductive from the standpoint of communication theory construction.

Knowledge vs. Performance

Communication scholars, for the most part, have not been tempted to model communication competence after generative-transformational linguistics, where competence is seen as a phenomenon distinct from performance (Chomsky, 1965). Chomsky, of course, was interested in modeling the type of language structure possessed by an ideal speaker/hearer. In our discipline, we have been concerned typically with the social consequences of communication and have, thus, followed the line of thinking articulated by sociolinguistists (e.g., Hymes, 1971) and social psychologists (Foote & Cottrell, 1955). But communication theorists tend to emphasize either knowledge or performance in their research, although these are by no means mutually exclusive. More specifically, Competence[1] theorists have attended more to what communicating organisms "know," while Competence[2] theorists have attended more to what communicators do to produce intended effects. It seems clear from the work accomplished to-date that both aspects are important for a complete understanding of communicative competence. It should not bother us that some researchers choose to focus on one aspect or the other. But a full blown theory of communicative competence must account for both knowledge structures and the expression of this knowledge in performance (Isaacson & Spear, 1982; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980).

Locating Communicative Competence

Is competence something "in" an individual, something one possess? Or is it something one constructs with others in a relationship? Competence[1] theorists have assumed that competence resides in the individual organism, although one individual's competence may be completely isomorphic with another's as a result of identical biological causes or identical experiences. Competence[2] theorists have generally located competence in the individual also, although they have assumed great individual variability (as mentioned above). Both groups view competence as something that creatures have and carry around with them. Incompetent messages are the result of ill will on the part of the competent communicator, accident, lack of attention to interactional rules, or incompetence in a specific context.

Recently Wiemann and Kelly (1979, 1981) have presented a rationale for considering competence to be a dyadic or relational concept. For these theorists competence is constructed in the relationship and is the result of a "match" of skills and, possibly, goals of the interactants. This differs from the usual assumption that if individuals possess competence, and competence is related to their social skills, then the more skills they have, the more competent they are. The relational perspective shifts the emphasis from skills to strategies for matching. The absolute number of skills one possesses does increase the probability of a good match in any given relationship, but does not lead to the classification of a person as either competent or incompetent. That is, it is not the person who is competent at

all, but rather it is the relationship that is awarded that label because the people in it "fit together" in a mutually satisfying way--they have managed to avoid the various relational traps and pitfalls that confront us all. The relational assumption as an answer to the location question avoids a "disease" metaphor for people with few skills and seems to incorporate cognitive as well as performance concerns (see Wiemann & Kelly, 1981, for more on this point).

While locating competence in the relationship is theoretically interesting (to us, anyway), it presents many measurement difficulties. It is not clear to us how to measure the joint construction of a competent interaction, much less a competent relationship, in process terms. Thus, we are left with measures which are essentially monadic, even if they ask for meta-level assessments of one's attitudes toward or judgments about self and other.

Outcome vs. Process

Do we infer competence from an intention-relevant response which communicators elicit from receivers? For example, is "dollars contributed to the campaign" a reasonable measure of a campaigner's competence? Or do we infer competence from the behaviors which communicators exhibit? (Note that we have to inspect behaviors even if we are examining communicator knowledge.) For example, is "exhibited empathy" a reasonable measure of a therapist's competence? The outcome/process dichotomy does not clearly discriminate between the Competence[1] and Competence[2] Schools, although it seems to us that Competence[1] theorists rarely worry about elicited responses

while Competence[2] theorists have attended variously to process and outcome measures.

On the face of it, the process approach seems most reasonable to us because events beyond communicators' control may prevent them from achieving desired outcomes quite apart from what they do. In other words, persons who are in some sense "competent" may be frustrated by circumstances in which they are powerless. The intelligent and knowledgeable student may be drugged by enemies and therefor perform poorly on the test. The skilled empathic listener may be frustrated by an inability of her friend to explain her ideas and feelings, and thus the skilled listener performs inadequately in the interaction. But perhaps one could argue that truly effective persons gain power over circumstances others would label outside of their control. If one accepts this position, then outcome measures seem quite reasonable. The decision hinges on the extent to which we view others and the world as corrigible entities.

Growth vs. Statis

A final issue is the standard against which we assess a person's or a relationship's competence. Competence is frequently taken to be a norm to be achieved, i.e., persons are judged competent if they can carry off a certain episode in a specified manner. Competence[2] theorists seem to have adopted this perspective, implicitly at least. Cognitive criteria for competence, specific performance standards, and skills training lend themselves to the assumption that there is a good or right way to communicate. When "normal" or "healthy" adult behavior is the object of study or training, this perspective is most

appropriate.

Competence[1] theorists, however, generally have taken a more developmental view. Their concern with phylogenetic relationships leads them to ask: What is to count as competent behavior in this context? It is only from such a contextually based perspective that one could characterize the irregular sign language of a chimp as communication. By extension, a developmental perspective leads to questions about the ontogeny of communicative competence, both individually and relationally (see Johnson, 1983, for more on this). A parent-infant relationship can be competent. A child can be communicatively skilled (or unskilled) relative to his/her maturity level, physiological development and the specific context in which the assessment is made.

Competence[2] theorists have tended to focus on adult behavior and have thus avoided the growth vs. statis issue. But as more emphasis is placed on teaching communication skills in elementary and secondary schools, more attention will have to be devoted to developmental questions.

Conclusion

Clearly the study of competence is an interesting and complex undertaking. Our progress over the last several years has been, in some ways, remarkable. But we think that it has been slowed by our collective inattention to the underlying premises which have motivated this work. Our purpose here has been to call some of these to your attention.

Any program of research (or individual project, for that

matter) involves a series of decisions. In this case, researchers first have to decide to study competence and then to limit that study to a specific type of theoretical entity -- communicative competence. From there the decision tree branches to general types of communicative competence, and then to emphases within types or some combination of emphases and types (see Figure 4). We think it is useful to know what sort of decisions one has made -- what sort of course one has and is pursuing. Only with that knowledge can we evaluate our own and others' work, arrive at a collective understanding of pertinent phenomena, and achieve a synthesis of the various perspectives on communicative competence.

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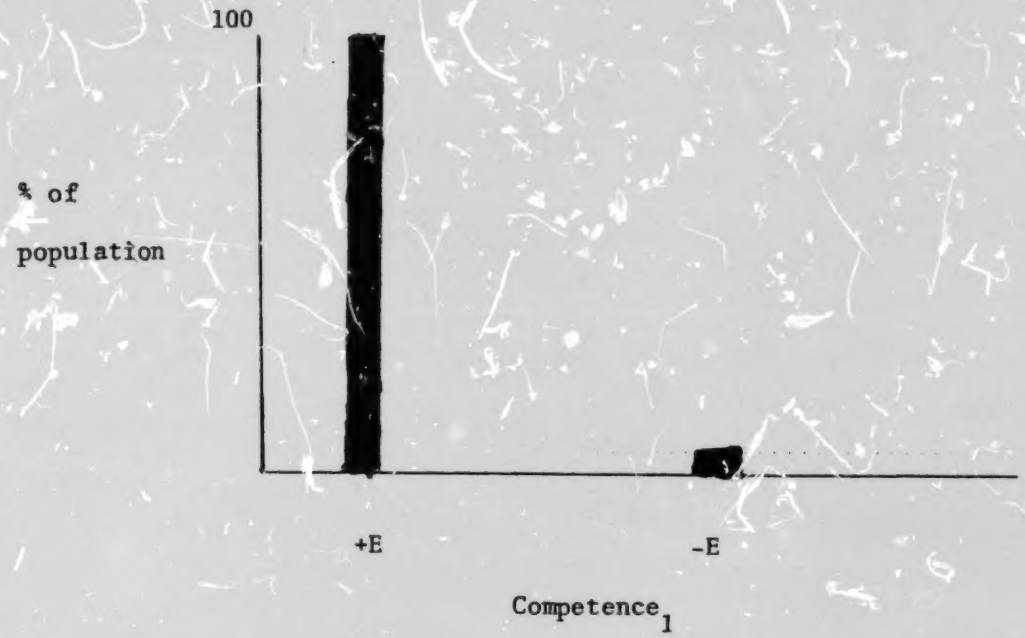


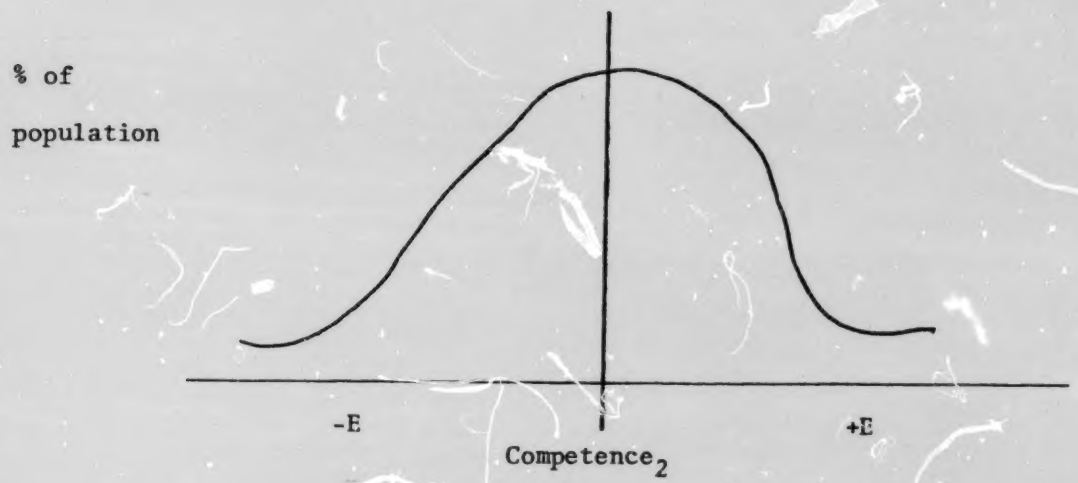
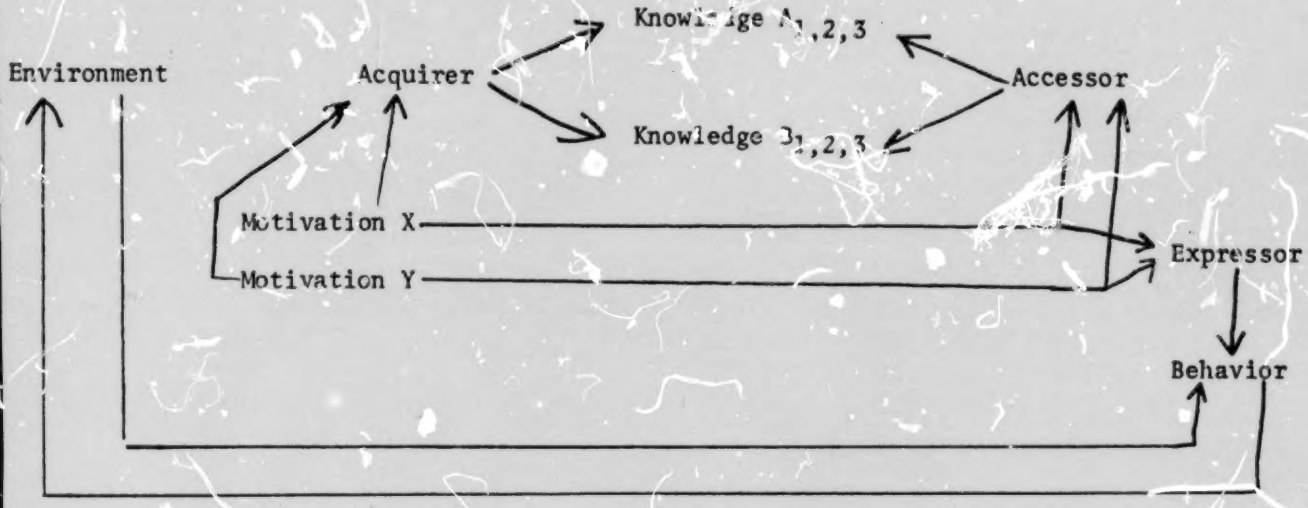


Figure 1. Effectiveness in Competence Models

Intention	→	Communication Strategy	→	Speech Act Choice	→	Encoding Choice	→	Performance
(Get $)	→	(Evoke Fear)	→	(Threat)	→	(High Obscenity)	→	"Give me the #@%&* $ or I will #@%¢* you!"

Figure 2. Competence, structures essential to human communication.



(Knowledge A = world knowledge
B = communication knowledge; 1 = tacit
2 = folk belief
3 = technical

Figure 3. Competence$_2$ structures essential to human communication.

Figure 4.

Decision Points in the Study of Competence